



# Integrated river basin Management

*From Concepts to Good Practice*

## Case Study 2

Mekong River Basin and  
the Mekong River Commission,  
Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand,  
and Vietnam

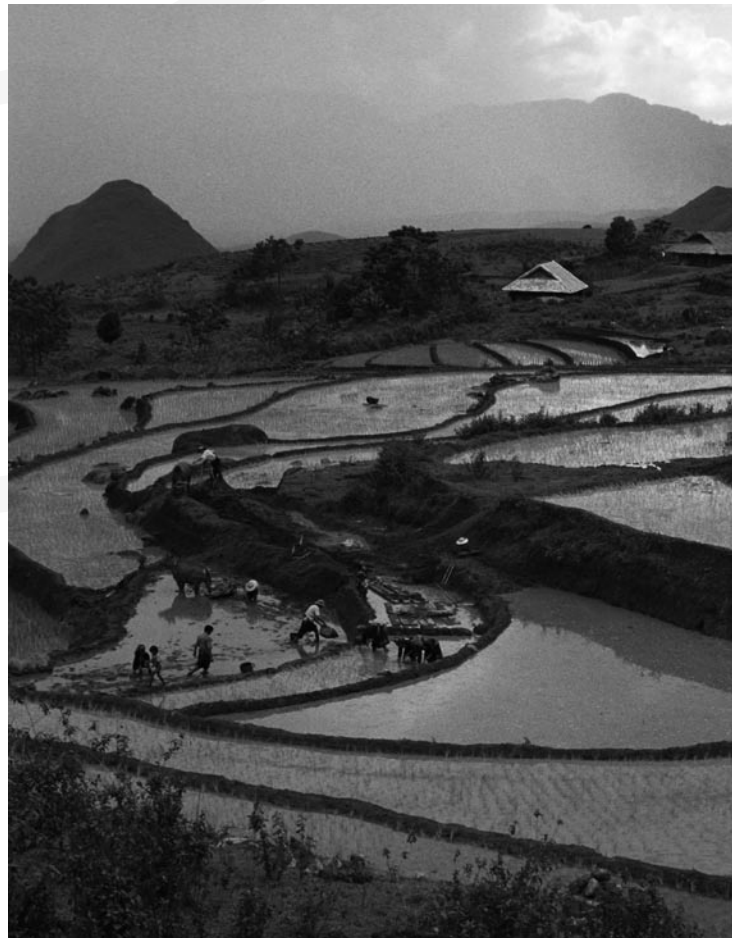
## Acknowledgments

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## Name of Organization: Mekong River Commission (MRC)



## History of Establishment:

In 1995, agreement on the Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin was reached, which formalized interim arrangements that had existed in various forms since 1957. The agreement is registered at the United Nations as a legal river basin compact. From 1957 to 1990, the four countries of the lower Mekong (Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Thailand, and Vietnam) were unable to agree to a formal basin agreement because of the many years of war and conflict between two or more of the countries. During this period, the United Nations, through its various agencies, promoted and supported cooperation with regard to the determination of acceptable development proposals on the main stem of the Mekong River. With peace coming to the region in the late 1990s and a degree of trust developing between the four countries, the United Nations was able to assist them in formulating a river basin agreement. This has resulted in a decade of cooperation, rules on data sharing and water management (now in preparation), and the formulation of a basin development plan to guide how the riparians are to collectively develop the basin's resources.

## Basin Characteristics:

The Mekong River Basin is defined by the land area surrounding all the streams and rivers that flow into the Mekong River. This includes parts of China, Myanmar, and Vietnam, nearly one-third of Thailand, and most of Cambodia and Lao PDR. The Mekong River Basin is nearly the size of France and Germany together. From its headwaters on the Tibetan Plateau, the 4,800-km Mekong River flows through six distinct geographical regions, each with characteristic features of elevation, topography, and land cover (see figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1 The Mekong River Basin



**Area:** 795,000 km<sup>2</sup>, encompassing parts of China, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand, and Vietnam

**River Basin Flow:** 475 billion m<sup>3</sup> average basin runoff

**Population:** 55,000,000

**Economy:** The Gross Regional Product is approximately \$US 1.6 billion (based on limited information; fish production is valued at \$US 800 million, and this is said to be about half the basin's GDP).

## Main Water Management Concerns:

1. To promote development and alleviate poverty, but at the same time protect productive and precious aquatic ecosystems and other ecology
2. To share benefits from future development among the four countries of the lower basin through an agreed basin development plan but within the parameters set out in an integrated basin flow management plan established to maintain the basin's health at an acceptable and agreed level.

## Type of Organization:

The MRC is an international river basin commission incorporating the four countries of the lower Mekong Basin – Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand, and Vietnam – as equal partners. The MRC consists of three permanent bodies: a Ministerial Council, a Joint Committee, and a Secretariat. National Mekong Committees act as focal points in each of the member-countries. The Ministerial Council is a high-level policy-making and decision-making body. The executive-level Joint Committee implements the Council's decisions and oversees the work program, investigations, and other activities of the Commission. Reporting to the Joint Committee is the MRC Secretariat (technical and administrative) that undertakes

the work program and manages outside consultancies. The Secretariat comprises national professionals (engineers, scientists, environmental experts, economists, administrative staff) in equal numbers from the four countries plus a varying, but small, number of international experts that are provided through the numerous donor-funded programs that assist the MRC with its work program.

China and Myanmar both occupy the upper Mekong basin and are currently observers on the Commission. It would be desirable for these two countries to become formal members of the MRC in the future.





## 1. Conceptual and Institutional Issues

The MRC Agreement limits the autonomy of the organization to issues that promote cooperation among the four countries in river basin development but in a way that protects the integrity of the basin's environmental resources and reflects the sovereign right of the countries to manage and protect their own national resources. Moreover, the Ministerial Council has the final say regarding any activities. As each country is represented on the Council and a consensus vote is needed on most issues, each country has some ability to control which issues are debated and approved. The MRC is only 10 years old and represents a modern and legally based organization. Though it was slow to adopt its new role as mandated in 1995, over the last four to five years, partially supported by the World Bank and the Global Environment Facility, it has been following a strong strategic planning approach and work plan that clearly defines its mission and goals. It is now well structured and organized.

## 2. Systems for Water-related Data

The MRC has recently approved a formal data and information sharing protocol that will now allow all four countries and the Secretariat to share and use the large amount of readily available data. The protocol also provides rules for future data collection. Resource inventories of the basin have been assembled and are being updated and analyzed to achieve a better understanding of the trends in resource health and the impacts likely to occur from future development. There is now a modern suite of hydrologic and socioeconomic models to facilitate complex simulations of the impacts of new policies and strategies, and of various basin development scenarios to be undertaken. Processes are in place to ensure the integrity and security of these models. All countries must agree if changes to the modeling process are to be made.

## 3. Basin-wide Policies and Strategies

The MRC Agreement provides only the basic concepts or rules that underpin a water sharing agreement and not the specific water shares themselves. Work is underway to develop more precise processes that will define either how water quantities are to be shared or how the benefits from various development scenarios are to be shared. The needs of the riverine ecology are being specifically studied so that any water sharing proposals will expressly take into account of the needs of the river systems and of the people that rely on them for their livelihoods.

## 4. Communication and Participation

As with most new basin organizations, the MRC is only beginning to assess the appropriate options for consulting with the basin's stakeholders and what participation processes could be followed to facilitate stakeholder input to decision making. Awareness programs are not yet in place for all stakeholder levels, but it is recognized that these need to be well entrenched before effective stakeholder participation can occur. As each country has a different approach to stakeholder consultation and participation, it is expected that it will be some time before appropriate processes that are acceptable to all four countries are developed and agreed.

## 5. Monitoring and Assessing Sustainability

To date, a set of performance indicators to measure how the basin is being managed has not been developed. As a first step, the MRC has prepared a State of the Basin report, which describes the health of the natural and social resources of the basin based on current information. This report will be regularly updated and will show the priority areas where performance indicators and improvement targets need to be developed.

## Tasks of the Organization and Staff Complement:

The MRC was established to promote cooperation between the four lower Mekong countries in the fields of sustainable development and utilization, conservation, and management of the Mekong River Basin. Functions include: basin-wide policy and strategy, coordination, basin-wide planning, environmental research, monitoring and reporting, data collection, management and sharing, project management and financing, and basin sustainability monitoring.

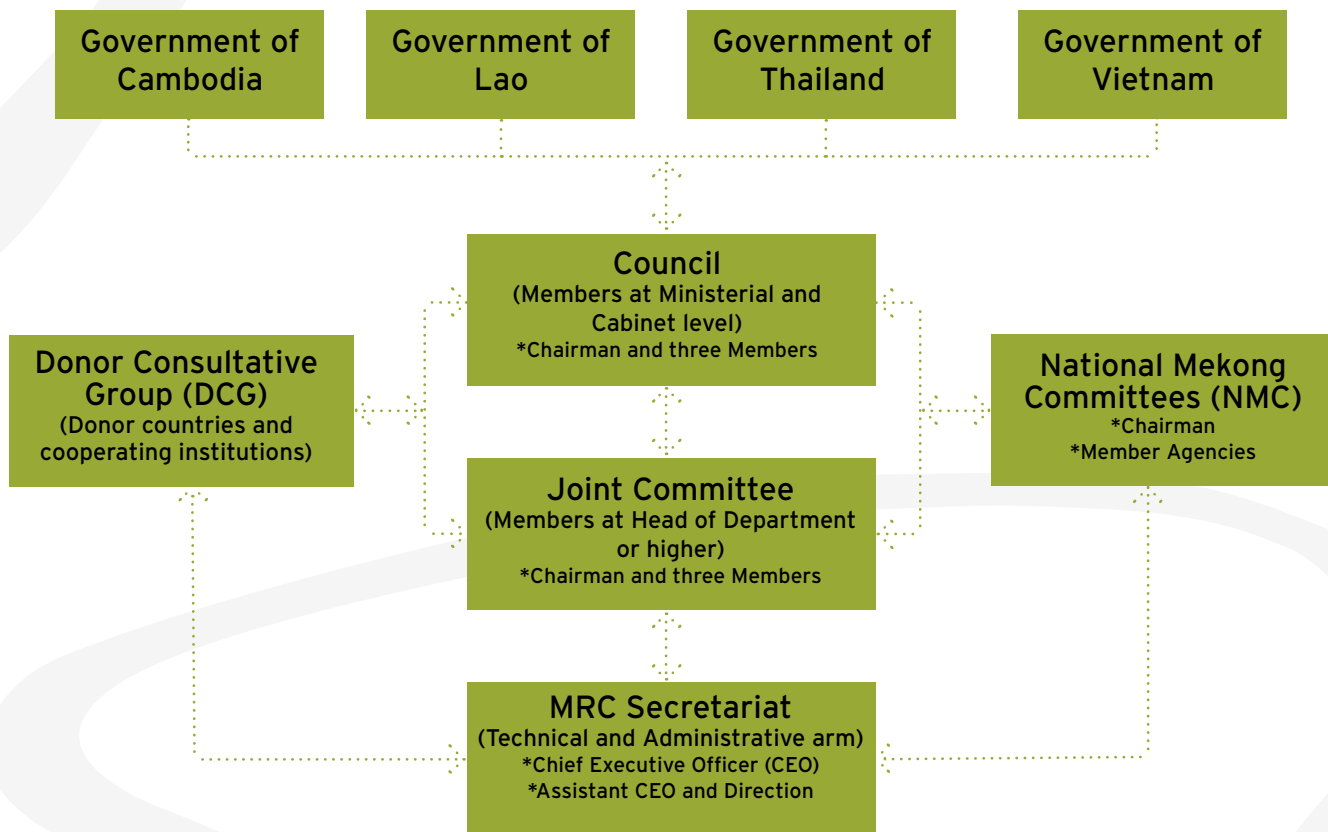
Some 80 staff work at the MRC. There is close liaison with the agencies in the four countries through working groups and committees.

The organization of the MRD is presented in figure 2.2.



Figure 2.2. Mekong River Commission Organization

## Mekong River Commission (MRC) Organogram



More information on the MRC can be found at <http://www.mrcmekong.org/>





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